

Ice CRAPPIES

by John L. Field

Although crappie can be moody biters, they can usually be caught. In many Ontario lakes there is over-population stunting because not enough anglers are thinning them out. What you've got to do is rig up and hang a juicy little morsel right in front of their little crappie faces while you're dreaming of coating them in Ice batter.

On the hot spot, ready for action.



Shawn Perich

Many ice anglers out there have a bad attitude about the black crappie. This is probably because many winter anglers simply don't know how good they taste or how cooperative and fun they can be. Lakers, perch and walleye are not the only worthy targets of the hard water angler. Crappies should receive a little of the fishing pressure just to give the others species a break!



Shawn Perich

Food and Locations

Crappies are a schooling fish that never stray far from their favourite foods. They like minnows, zooplankton, copopods, daphnia and scuds, (freshwater shrimp). Since plankton suspend in large clouds often spanning from 20 to 60 feet in the water column, crappie hover in their midst and feed. On sonar these micro predators look like ornaments on a Christmas tree.

Good fall fishing continues into ice-on but there is a deepening trend ahead. They seek warmer water, food, and oxygen. It can be a tough time in shallow lakes. In a shallow lake (20 feet or so), check the deepest hole for crappie. In mid-winter fish are lethargic biters except before the arrival of a low pressure weather front. Another welcomed event is a February thaw which can provide some awesome fishing. In late winter crappies again become active as they near pre-spawn conditions.

The most probable places to find crappie are around submerged islands, points and flats where you find brush and, weeds. Try the inside turns of points around the 20 foot level near deeper water. Another good pattern that can be effective all season is to find a bay with a green weedline, then scout for a deeper flat in the 20 to 30 foot depth range, 25 to 100 yards from the weeds. But, when crappie are feeding on suspended forage,

they can be anywhere from 15 to 60 feet down out over the open basin. On a daily basis, all of these locations change with light levels -- deeper when it's brighter, shallower when it's darker.

After picking a day's starting point, use sonar to locate a likely school of crappies. In cold weather a flasher works more efficiently than an LCD. Shoot the signal through clear ice (up to a foot thick) by pouring a little salt water on the ice and placing your transducer in it aimed straight down. This brine solution acts as a sound conductor and an anti-freeze. When you want to drill and fish, place the transducer down the hole into the water and level it to see the bait you are using in the water. Some fishermen glue a bubble onto the top of the transducer holder. Seeing the relationship between your bait and the fish will help later in presentation. If you've found fish on sonar, place your bait a foot or two above them. If you don't have a fish finder or are gambling on a spot, five feet above bottom is a good point to start your presentation, but check from there to the ice till you hit fish.

The way to chase schooling fish that are on the move is to travel light. You may have to move around a lot so don't overburden yourself. If you don't need to drill too many holes, use a hand auger. Although this is controversial, fishing through a cluster of holes must look like spot lights on a marionette show below. Don't group too many holes and fill them with slush. While you are fishing, use a portable ice shack to provide protection, without hampering mobility. If it's in the budget, buy a radiant propane heater — it's a real luxury.

Tackle and Presentation

Like ice fishing for other panfish, it takes miniature tackle and delicate presentation to entice and hook crappies too. Select rods 24 inches long or less. Some come with reel seats but taping reels on is fine. Electric tape on the metal keeps your fingers warmer. Ultra-light reels spooled with a pliable high visibility line, in weights from two to six pound test.

To maximize your catch of crappie have several bait options on hand with complementing hooks, jigs and flasher spoons for each. Jigging spoons with bait like a Jig-A-Whopper 116th. oz. Rocker or Hawger Minnow, or the Northland Tackle 116th. oz Gypsy Jig in white or glow colors are great jig choices. Northland

also makes an ice fly called the Hackle Ant. Get them in glow colours.

The smallest shiners or fathead minnows available are probably the best choice in baits. Experiment and hook them front or backwards through the dorsal fin. May fly nymphs are a good scud or plankton imitator. Scuds(shrimp) are an excellent bait where available. Ice flies imitate scuds and zooplankton. Two or three maggots hooked through the fat end are effective and will also work as will artificial tippers like Berkley Power Wigglers. Jigs should be balanced and knotted to hang horizontally.

Because panfish can be light biters, the hardest part is detecting strikes. Floats are good to use because they indicate strikes and return the bait to the strike zone. Some people complain that they are a nuisance when it's brutally cold because they freeze. That is less a factor when you're fishing in a shack.

You can trigger strikes by shaking the bait, which isn't hard to do below freezing, or you can hop it or slowly lift it and lower it. Fish on sonar near your lure are almost a sure thing, so be ready! If you need help detecting bites, use a "Bic spring tip". To make one, wind the spring from a ball point pen on the rod tip



Small jigging spoons tipped with these products produce good slabs

and thread the line through it. Its flexibility will indicate taps on the line that the tip won't. Another way to sense a light take is to lower the rod tip, if the bait doesn't fall, it's in a fish's mouth. Strike! For fish that gum but don't engulf a bait, lift or reel the bait 10 feet then slowly lower it back following it all the way down. Set the hook with the wrist, not with the elbow, for more hook-ups. On some days strikes are few, so make the ones you get count!

From the mouth of crappie connoisseurs come such metaphors as "Slab for a ten incher" or a "Pie signifying a fourteen incher". Crappies are worth ice fishing for. Get hooked this winter too. Nourish your spirit and your body by honing your fishing skills and enjoying a nice bunch of crappies.